

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

a film by Tom Zubrycki

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

I started filming **FRIENDS AND ENEMIES** three months into the dispute, after some critical moves had already been made by both sides.

Firstly, in mid-February, Brisbane had been plunged into two weeks of black-outs by power operators sympathetic to the linesmen on strike. These had been called off by the Queensland Trades and Labour Council after the Premier had promised to re-open negotiations on the linesmen's jobs.

A week later, Joh had gone back on his word, completely outmanoeuvring the TLC. Worse still, he had passed three sets of legislation that were so harsh, it was virtually impossible for the men to go back to work.

I arrived when civil disobedience was at its worst, the ACTU had just announced a campaign to blockade the State, and Petersen was still refusing to negotiate. The stage was set for a massive confrontation.

I was surprised that the blockade was called off so soon, especially given that Queensland industry was being totally strangulated.

But the Federal Labor government had an obvious interest in preserving the status quo — the ACTU and the Queensland TLC went along with this and suddenly we'd entered a waiting period where the High Court would pass judgement on the whole dispute.

I began to realise that I was filming a period of slow demoralisation — the dispute was turning in on itself, people were trying to find scapegoats, and suddenly the behaviour of the Queensland TLC was under careful scrutiny.

On the one hand you've got people who have put their jobs on the line over a matter of principle. On the other, you've got their union officials — equally frustrated because the dispute was no longer in their control.

The people who were really calling the shots — the Queensland TLC, the ACTU, the Federal Labor government — made decisions about tactics and strategy, that were fed down to the rank and file at weekly meetings. It's understandable then, that the rank and file became more and more embittered as they realised they were powerless to influence the course of events.

What are workers' rights in this situation? Surely to be more privy to the back room manoeuvrings that go on, so that at least they can feel they're more involved. Otherwise a yawning credibility gap opens up between workers and their representatives.

I feel that when criticising deficiencies in New Right ideology, people in the labour movement automatically defend their own organisation as embodying the essence of democracy and fair play. **FRIENDS AND ENEMIES** points to the danger of doing this uncritically.

Tom Zubrycki

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BACKGROUND NOTES

In 1984, the world price of minerals dropped, and the Queensland economy entered a recession that sent unemployment over the 10% mark. The Queensland Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen, was looking for an excuse to cover up the problem — scapegoating the unions was a convenient ploy.

Meanwhile, after years of biding time, the union movement was spoiling for a fight.

In mid 1984, as part of its moves to cut public spending, the government planned to introduce private contractors into the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB). Fearing for the job security and working conditions of permanent staff, the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) actively opposed these plans.

After 6 months, negotiations eventually broke down, and men at several depots went out on strike. The Union complied. Negotiations resumed ... and then broke down again.

This process was repeated about three times before the frustrated men finally defied a Commission back-to-work order.

This was the excuse the Premier needed. He immediately declared a State of Emergency, and on February 13 1985, sacked 1002 men. Power station workers came out in support of the sacked linesman and large areas of Queensland were thrown into darkness.

After 14 days of blackouts, and huge losses to the State economy, the Premier finally offered to reinstate the men, but under new no-strike contracts.

The Trades and Labour Council (TLC) ended the blackouts, hoping the Premier would respond by withdrawing these new conditions.

However a week later, the government wrote these conditions into one of the harshest pieces of legislation ever imposed on an Australian trade union — instituting a permanent State of Emergency in the electricity industry. Any strike action is now illegal.

To get their jobs back, linesmen would have to work longer hours, sign a no-strike clause, lose 6 months of superannuation entitlements, and be prepared to work anywhere in the state. Failure to comply with these conditions would subject new employees to a \$1,000 fine, or confiscation of property to the same value. Of the 1002 sacked men 800 rejected the new conditions ...

In 1986, the National Party won the State Election, and in 1987 extended its essential services legislation to cover most other industry. Strikes are now illegal in any industry that exports goods or services out of Queensland.

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THE QUEENSLAND POWER DISPUTE & THE NEW RIGHT - SPECTRE OF THE 1980s?

In the last few years there has been a concerted campaign by a section of Australian business and other conservative interests to significantly reduce the power of trade unions.

The Queensland government's carefully orchestrated campaign against Queensland trade unions has caused an Australia-wide reaction, encouraging a number of private companies to follow suite, for example, Mudginberry, Dollar Sweet and Robe River disputes.

"There have been opportunities in the past, but the bullet hasn't been bitten until now and it happened here in Queensland. **And from my point of view, anyone who cares about this country, who cares about freedom, about fairplay, about rights and free enterprise, and the country's future and its future generations, has to accept that a confrontation was necessary** at some point in time when a government would resist the forces of trade unionism to create the catalyst that might bring about opportunities to change the industrial relations environment."

— Mr Siebenhausen, QUEENSLAND CONFEDERATIONS OF INDUSTRY

The New Right is arguing for a return to a nineteenth century sledge-hammer approach to industrial relations, with employers dictating the terms of working conditions, slashing wages and workers' hard-won benefits, and reducing the protections provided by unions to working men and women in Australia.

Recent anti-union legislation rushed through Queensland parliament makes it virtually impossible to strike legally. If the New Right gets its way, such laws will become the model for other States. In this year's federal election, both Liberal and National parties adopted the model of Queensland's Essential Services legislation as the corner-stone of their industrial relations policies.

The Queensland government is at the forefront of the New Right whose aims are not solely to "crush trade unions". Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's defeat of the Queensland power workers was part of a wider, "hidden" campaign to drastically erode civil liberties on a variety of levels.

In the last decade there has been a barrage of legislation:

- Commonwealth Games Act
- Pregnancy Termination Act
- Amendments to Liquor Act, re: child molesters, deviants and perverts
- Drugs Abuse Act

The New Right is a threat not only because of its emergence as a powerful, high-profile force in Australian politics. The threat has been heightened by Prime Minister Bob Hawke's particular brand of consensus politics, epitomised in FRIENDS AND ENEMIES by Simon Crean (ACTU), Ian Court (ACTU), Ray Dempsey (TLC) and others.

The steady drift of the Left towards the Right in Australian politics is of great concern when looking at the "threat" of the New Right.

Who will be their real opposition? Is our future Queensland?

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THE POSTURING OF THE LABOUR BUREAUCRATS

"... we go into talks, we still go ahead and develop a campaign of industrial action, but we don't implement it."

— Simon Crean, ACTU

"The industrial action hasn't been lifted in the sense that it has ended, we do not see the dispute as being resolved, we have declared a moratorium. We think the Federal government initiative is a constructive, commonsense initiative, and we're prepared to give it time to demonstrate that it can show results."

— Ian Court, ACTU

"There have been no secret deals with the ACTU ... the initiative that has been taken by the Federal government, that's the important question, not some of these superfluous sorts of things."

"Let me say that the picket, the march, and all those other activities, were *not* part of the trade union movement's activities. And the more and more we see people indulging in these sorts of exercises, the more and more the trade union movement is getting to a position of completely disassociating itself."

— Ray Dempsey, TLC

THE DESPERATE MANOEUVERINGS OF THE BETRAYED RANK AND FILE

"These blokes are just as guilty as the scabs. The leadership from this man (Ray Dempsey) has been nil. I wouldn't even put him in charge of the Titanic — that's how bad he is."

— Bernie Neville, sacked SEQEB worker

When you look at it, this has done wonders...Fair enough, you're a lot poorer, but...hasn't it sorted out your political views? Your friends from your enemies?"

"I've never seen so much hate amongst men for one another. These blokes were friends with blokes working in that rotten mausoleum there. Now they hate each other's guts...You'd kill the old bugger (Joh) only he'd be a martyr."

— Joyce Nugent, mother of sacked SEQEB worker

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Pat Stephens' son joined the Army a few weeks ago. It was his last resort after being unable to find full-time work since the end of Queensland's SEQEB power dispute in 1985.

He was one of 150 unionists that Joh Bjelke-Petersen said would never work again because of their involvement in the dispute.

Pat Stephens missed a picket of an H R Nicholls Society meeting at Mooloolaba to travel to Sydney and speak at the showing of Tom Zubrycki's documentary *Friends and Enemies* at the Film Festival.

Friends and Enemies follows the progress of the long dispute starting with the sacking of more than 1,000 SEQEB workers in February 1985. It documents the effects and reactions brought on by the Queensland government's decision to use all its powers to smash union rights.

Conflicts

There is no narration beside occasional sentences on the screen describing developments in the dispute. Scenes depict the conflicts which develop in various situations — on the job, in people's homes, on the streets, in union offices and in the mass media.

An increasing sense of desperation develops throughout the film, as possible industrial confrontations that could win the dispute for the workers are, again and again, nobbled by the back-room tactics of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council (TLC) and the ACTU.

We see TLC secretary Ray Dempsey pouring forth rhetoric about the state government's approach, and then urging the sacked workers to trust in the outcome of a High Court challenge to the essential services legislation used to sack them.

We see Bjelke-Petersen and his Industrial Affairs Minister Vince Lester harping about the importance of allowing "free enterprise" to proceed without restraint, and the need to stop "union anarchy".

And, more clearly towards the end, we see the devastating effect of all this rhetoric on the lives of the people targetted for Bjelke-Petersen's "test case".

Broken relationships, poverty, houses being sold and people moving interstate to escape the strain of the dispute — the conversations of sacked workers and their families reveal the tangible results of the lost struggle.

Yet the film also shows the workers and their supporters keeping the struggle alive, with flying pickets urging scabs to go home, demonstrators facing Queensland's notorious police, and workers haranguing union officials.

Lot wiser

One woman's experience of the struggle is summed up at the end of the film: "You're a lot poorer, but it's sorted out your political views, who your friends and enemies are. You're a lot wiser."

Friends and Enemies does not make any real attempt to analyse the reasons why the union establishment pulled back from the SEQEB dispute time and again, allowing it to drift into defeat, nor to explain the forces behind Bjelke-Petersen's anti-union crusade.

But it does provide a close, intimate examination of the effect of the dispute, and shows the importance of union support if New Right attacks are to be defeated.

Director and producer Tom Zubrycki, who also made the acclaimed *Kemira: Diary of a Strike*, said at the showing that the film fills a vacuum in examining the trade union movement: "In order to challenge the New Right, one should look carefully at the institutions that can tackle them, particularly the unions."

Despite any lack of analysis, such an examination is an important contribution at a time when Bjelke-Petersen's approach to unions is shared by the federal conservative parties, and when the laws used to defeat the power workers now threaten all workers in Queensland.

Friends and Enemies will be released in Brisbane in the next few weeks, and later in other cities. ■

Tribune, June 24, 1987

The same theme of labour is apparent in a couple of other festival movies — *Friends and Enemies* (Australia) and *Comrades* (UK).

The former is a feature-length documentary about the Queensland power strike, made by Tom Zubrycki, but it's not informed with the conventional line-up of heroes and villains. Joh and his clownish ministers do get a drubbing, but the film is more about politics inside the union movement.

It argues that the Queensland power workers were dumped by their leaders and the ACTU. The story-telling leaves much that is unclear, but there are some moments of great poignancy as Zubrycki follows the lives of ordinary people over eight months of hardship.

The Sydney Morning Herald,

Thursday, June 11

Tom Zubrycki's *Friends And Enemies* brought a hint of colour to nerveless lips whitened by years of clenching their way through worthy labour movement documentaries which ignored large piles of dirty linen.

And what's grungy in the labour movement? For a start, those senior visionaries in the ALP/ACTU/union headquarters whose well developed sense of self interest usually leads them to counsel against militancy and for — dare I say it — consensus.

Friends And Enemies follows an increasingly frustrated and outmanoeuvred rank and file through the long months of the 1985 Queensland power dispute. Scabs take the unionists' jobs, while union bureaucrats pusillanimitise and the strike bogs down in the courts.

The slimy union bureaucrats start to look good, however, in comparison to the opposition: the Queensland Government's Minister for Labour Relations, Vince Lester. Vince easily bettered all scores previously recorded on my Queasometer, and eventually the damn think broke over *Friends And Enemies'* coverage of Vince's appearance as jest of honour at a 'debutantes' ball somewhere deep in the heart of Queensland's lumpen aristocracy.

But the film's focus is on the struggle within the labour movement between union officials, heavily into crisis management, and the rank and file who have been precipitated into personal, financial and political crisis by the action of the Queensland government.

Before we all get unceremoniously bundled into that corporate good night — sectoral elites doing deals in the name of some disturbingly unspecified notion of Australian "development" — it is good to see a bit of raging against the passing of the light.

FILM NEWS